

REPTILE-ASSOCIATED SALMONELLOSIS

What is reptile-associated Salmonellosis?

Salmonella is a bacteria which causes an infection called salmonellosis in the stomach and intestines. Increasingly, rare types have been identified in persons who have had no other apparent exposures other than contact with pet reptiles. While the diarrhea and fever caused by *Salmonella* bacteria may be a self-limiting condition in healthy adults, salmonellosis in infants and elderly persons often requires hospitalization and can be a life-threatening condition. Reptile owners can get the disease when they forget to wash their hands after handling a reptile or after cleaning its cage, and can then spread the disease to others. When reptiles are allowed free access to the home, they may also contaminate bathtubs, sinks, carpets, etc.

How is reptile-associated Salmonellosis spread?

Although most often, people get salmonellosis from eating undercooked meat and eggs, it can also be spread through either direct or indirect contact with reptiles and their droppings. A high proportion of reptiles are asymptomatic carriers of *Salmonella*, with fecal carriage rates of up to 90%. Thus far, attempts to eliminate carriage of the bacteria in reptiles have been unsuccessful and have lead to increased antibiotic resistance. Reptiles can become infected from mother to eggs, through direct contact with other infected reptiles, or with contaminated reptile feces. The eating of feces by hatchlings is common for iguanas and other lizards, and this behavior contributes to the establishment of *Salmonella* as normal intestinal flora.

How can reptile-associated Salmonellosis be prevented?

Persons at increased risk for infection or serious complications of salmonellosis (e.g., pregnant women, children aged <5 years, and immunocompromised persons such as persons with AIDS) should avoid contact with reptiles. **There should be no reptiles kept in households where there are children less than 1 year of age.**

Reptiles should not be kept in child-care centers and may not be appropriate pets in households in which persons at risk for infection reside.

Reptiles should not be allowed to crawl around on floors where small children may also be.

To prevent contamination of food-preparation areas (e.g., kitchens) and other selected sites, reptiles should be kept out of these areas. In particular, kitchen sinks should not be used to bathe reptiles or to wash reptile dishes, cages or aquariums. Avoid eating or drinking near the reptile cage.

Pay scrupulous attention to the animal's maintenance and hygiene. Handlers should thoroughly wash hands and disinfect surfaces exposed to the reptile.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal doctor or veterinarian.
- Your local health department, listed in your telephone directory.
- The Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Epidemiology (801) 538-6191

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